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The Omnipresent Male Scholar

Male scholars are everywhere. But where exactly are the women? The question leaps from the pages of yet another major study of the Islamic tradition. This one is by Muhammad Qasim Zaman, the highly regarded scholar and professor of Near Eastern Studies and Religion at Princeton University. *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age* examines, the blurb tells us, 'some of the most important issues facing the Muslim world since the late nineteenth century'. It deals with major shifts in educational and political structures, transformed patterns of religious learning, and pervasive, endemic violence toward women, especially in the Indian subcontinent.

The index entry for 'women' has fifteen sub-headings; 'marriage' has ten. Yet in that same extensive index, actual women are virtually absent. Of nearly 250 named individuals, from formative-period scholars through medieval luminaries to contemporary pundits and academics, a scant three – barely more than one per cent – are women, all teaching in Western universities and none writing as a Muslim.

The index does contain one reference to a Muslim woman, an Indian divorcee whose rotten treatment by her ex-husband in 1985 provoked an uproar over Islamic law and spawned the misnamed Muslim Women Protection of Rights on Divorce Act; she lends her name to the 'Shah Bano controversy (India).' Other Muslim women, a few of them named, appear in the body of the book, especially in the chapter 'Women, Law, and Society,' as victims of honour crimes, harassment, and forced marriage. But there are no female scholars, thinkers, or leaders cited concerning either of topics in the book's subtitle, 'Religious Authority and Internal Criticism'. Even the thirty-page bibliography is light on contributions by women, with no more than two or three female authors per page. Leila Ahmed's canonical 1992 *Women and Gender in Islam* is missing; so is Samira Haj's *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: Reform, Rationality, and Modernity*, published in 2010. Also absent are the numerous monographs by women on women in early twentieth century Egypt, a time and place Zaman discusses at some length.

Zaman is a careful scholar, and gender issues are clearly on his mind in this otherwise excellent book. So how is it that despite the centrality of women's issues to the story of ideas Zaman tells, one looks in vain for women's ideas on the issues?

Who is an authority?

Let me acknowledge that it's bad form to criticise someone for writing the book they actually wrote rather than the one you wish they had written. Zaman's 'dramatis personae' are the traditionally-educated *ulama*, or religious scholars. He draws on philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre's famous description of a tradition as 'an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined' through on-going argument and debate with external and internal critics. Since the *ulama* include practically no women, it is no surprise that its internal critics are male.

Still, this cannot entirely explain women's striking absence from the book. There is no hermetic seal around the category of *ulama*. The key players in *Modern Islamic Thought* are Indian Deobandis and Egyptian Salafis along with Qatar-based mufti Yusuf al-Qaradawi but non-*'alim* men pop up throughout. The late Pakistani scholar Fazlur Rahman, who wrote extensively about Islamic reform, and Tariq Ramadan, Oxford professor and exponent of 'European' Islam, make cameos. In listing the people excluded from al-Qaradawi's *Ulama Union*, Zaman mentions 'dissident Iranian intellectual' 'Abdolkarim Soroush, exiled 'Egyptian scholar' Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, and 'Syrian civil engineer' Muhammad Shahrur and explains why they do not belong. The exclusion of women like Siti Musdah Mulia, former head of the Indonesian Council of Ulema's research division; American theologian and gender-justice advocate Amina Wadud; or Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi passes without comment, seemingly too obvious to mention. But why should this be so?

We read about Qaradawi and early-twentieth-century Egyptian scholar Muhammad Rashid Rida's discussions of marriage but what of their female interlocutors? Even if Rida did not directly engage the flourishing turn-of-the-century Egyptian women's press debate on polygamy, he was undoubtedly aware of its contours. And anyway, might it not have been instructive for Zaman to compare the register in which he defended polygamy to that in which his countrywoman Malak Hifni Nassef, writing as Bahithat al-Badiya, lambasted it? When Qaradawi gives his seal of approval to *misyar* marriages, second-class unions in which women relinquish rights to support and regular visitation, he implicitly engages with Muslim women's objections; Zaman notes his calculated rhetorical appeal to female choice. Wouldn't it be important to know what these women say, if only to better understand what is significant in the argument of the *ulama*?

It is no secret that the interpretive monopoly of the *ulama* has been broken, nor that many *ulama* still wield considerable power in interesting ways. The exclusion of women's ideas and contributions gives an impoverished picture of the intellectual and social climates in which these men work. Rather than an atavistic force mired in the past, the *ulama* have been, in Zaman's phrase, 'custodians of change'. In the process, they stake their claims to authority in ways that require accommodation to new conditions. To compete in modern discursive arenas, the world of the online fatwa and global satellite programming, they must offer an attractive product.

Women may not be full conversation partners, or even subordinate consultants, in *ulama* circles. Nevertheless they are part of the *ulama's* clientele, part of their audience, part of their flock – and, increasingly, part of their competition. Laymen and women, modernists, Islamists and traditionalists, approach issues differently today in part because of another major change in the period Zaman studies: the emergence of women scriptors since the late nineteenth century as participants in debates over religious issues, foremost, but not exclusively, those concerning women.

Interlude 1

In October 2011, I participated in a meeting of Muslim and Orthodox Jewish scholars and religious leaders in New York. I was a last-minute replacement for a male scholar who had to bow out. Everyone else on the programme was male. The Jews were rabbis; the Muslims included professors, a chaplain, and the Sudanese-born president of the Islamic Society of North America, Mohamed Magid. The daytime sessions were by invitation only and the audience was mostly male and academic; the evening session, open to the New York community, was a better mix. That night, my rabbi counterpart and I each gave a lecture on 'Foundational Texts,' to which two people – two men – from each tradition responded, including Magid. And then, in the question-and-answer session, someone lobbed in a leading question about scripture, gender, and family authority, which I had chosen, after some internal debate, not to talk explicitly about. (I didn't want to be the woman who always talks about women.)

Magid addressed it head on. He brought up the frequently quoted verse of the Qur'an, 4:34, which is usually understood to affirm male authority over women and to direct men who fear 'women's "rebelliousness"' to 'admonish them, leave them alone in bed, and strike them'. Magid said that when community members ask him about it, and the authority it seems to grant husbands to hit their misbehaving wives, he insists that they read it in the light of the egalitarian verse with which the chapter begins.

Two things struck me at the time as vital in Magid's response. First, he understood equality in 4:1's creation narrative ('Oh people, revere your Lord who created you from a single soul and created from it its mate and from the two of them brought forth many men and women spread far and wide') not merely as a statement about men and women's equal worth as human beings but as directly relevant to questions about male authority and disciplinary power. Second, even more fundamental, he took for granted that that passage's narrative actually was egalitarian. If this seems obvious now, it was anything but three decades ago.

Magid's remarks illustrated a point I had made in my lecture about shifting norms of interpretation within Muslim communities. It is not just the key ideas that have changed but the ways in which the text is approached: often in isolation from its longstanding commentaries, directly, by people not trained as traditional scholars. As US-based Pakistani scholar Riffat Hassan had pointed out in the late 1980s, Muslim commentators had almost universally assumed the first human was male and the second, created from him, female and therefore 'ontologically secondary and derivative.' She objected; the only evidence for this came from the tradition of the Prophetic hadith; the Qur'an says no such thing. African-American scholar Wadud's ground-breaking *Qur'an and Woman*, which was first published in Malaysia in 1992, brought new considerations to bear, largely those of Arabic grammar. Its grammatical explanations mirrored classical commentary, but it bypassed other elements of that tradition, most signally, engagement with the works of other commentators. Wadud was not playing insider baseball.

Her constituencies included the Malaysian organisation Sisters in Islam, with whom she had worked, and small communities of academics, including Pakistani-born Asma Barlas, who followed up, refined, and departed from Wadud's arguments in her *Believing Women in Islam*. These and an increasing number of essays and books, written in English, engaging with theories about reading and the creation of meaning, were not aimed at the traditional *ulama*, but they did engage with male Muslim thinkers. Wadud cites Egyptian Islamist Sayyid Qutb, but is most profoundly influenced by Fazlur Rahman. Neither is a member of the traditional *ulama*.

Departing from tradition

If Zaman's story is an analysis of the *ulama* and their internal debates, and Wadud's intervention is a deliberate move away from the tradition, Sherman Jackson's *Islam and the Blackamerican*, published in 2005, is a hybrid. Jackson, a Sunni Muslim who holds the King Faisal Chair of Islamic Thought and Culture at the University of Southern California, examines Black American history and theology. He brings the classical Sunni Muslim tradition, including a few of its recent interpreters, into conversation with an African-American intellectual tradition, largely Protestant. The people whose ideas he discusses are again overwhelmingly male. The index names 187 men and eight women, just over four per cent. The fact that the cover photo is of 'Nation Sisters' might lead a reader to expect that gender issues would get a significant airing; instead, Jackson presents a paragraph of very intriguing hypotheses about hyper-masculinity and feminisation in American Christianity and Islam. He notes that the issues deserve 'serious attention,' but fall outside the scope of the work. He indicates his hope to address them in later studies. Unfortunately, gender issues recede further into the background in *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering*, a ground-breaking work published in 2009, interweaving Sunni theological ideas and African-American religious thought to construct a viable Black-friendly Sunni theology in the face of ongoing racial harms. And individual women fade too: its index names four women, including a fourteenth century Damascene acolyte of the theologian Ibn Taymiyyah, and 137 men; still better than Zaman but nonetheless dismal.

An insistence that the topic of women is too important to be dealt with briefly can serve to defer it continually. In his slim but influential book *Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, the late Algeria-born, France-based scholar Mohammed Arkoun begs his readers' pardon 'for not having undertaken a detailed analysis of numerous verses that for centuries fixed the status of women.' He blames limitations of space. The chapter 'Women' stretches over four pages. The chapter 'The Person' occupies twenty. There is no chapter on men.

Despite his postponement of any sustained discussion of gender matters, Jackson addresses two points that bear directly on women's intellectual contributions. The first is his argument for engagement with the classical tradition. In *Islam and the Blackamerican*, he proposed mastery 'of the super tradition of Islam' as essential for Black American Muslims. Such mastery involves extensive training, linguistic skill, and possibly personal apprenticeship. By *Islam and Black Suffering*, though, he had come to believe that standard 'both unreasonable and unnecessary'. Rather, one need only 'gain enough facility in Tradition to display the requisite degree of 'rhetorical etiquette' to be recognised as playing by the rules of Islamic 'public reason' when vindicating, crafting, or critiquing doctrinal and practical positions' .

In theory, the lowered bar for participation in Islam's tradition is good news for women, who confront significant obstacles in obtaining traditional education. As Zaman discusses at length in *Modern Islamic Thought*, the dichotomy between madrasa and secular education no longer holds and university education at least supplements when it does not replace traditional textual learning. And, in any case, women are seeking out various forms of hybrid religious education, including in the West.

No, the problem here is the passive 'to be recognised'. Recognised by whom? This assumes that someone in power is willing to recognise someone outside his (ethnic, scholarly, class, or gender) circle as an acceptable participant. Jackson recounts an incident where Egypt's Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa bestowed the status of legitimate disputant by virtue of 'rhetorical etiquette' on Qutb, the ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood, by calling him *shaykh* Sayyid Qutb. Like a nineteenth century London men's club, to enter the ranks of shaykhs, one needs to be sponsored by a member.

Interlude 2

I pointed out to my department chair that with a recent retirement and a promotion, all the full professors in my department at Boston University are male, and all the associate professors female (the assistant professors are a mix). He was puzzled: Why should that matter? I replied that since only full professors deliberate and vote on the promotion of associates, when the first of us comes up for promotion, there won't be a woman in the room. I hadn't thought about that, he said. And then, to his credit, he did.

Provincialising Men

Discounting Muslim sexism by describing non-Muslim sexism is a cheap trick. But it's fair game to describe how patriarchal traditions align to prejudice women. It is not just scholars of Islam, in any sense of that phrase, who ignore women in favour of their male counterparts; women's perspectives and contributions to thought are routinely discounted in Western contexts. Lists of major Western thinkers, key intellectuals, or important reformers display similar bias. I have an unscientific but long-standing practice of noticing this sort of list. Sometimes there are no women at all, or only one, in a list. For example, Oneworld's *Makers of Muslim History* biography series contains 28 men, 1 woman; Harper Collins' *Eminent Lives* 12 men, 0 women. Occasionally, women approach a fifth or even a quarter of a group as in *Penguin Lives*. But women usually comprise between 10 and 15% of any given list of key people. A local university's list of high-profile lectures for the upcoming year, 'Seven Thought-Provoking Evenings of Diverse Opinions and World Perspectives,' included only one woman among its luminaries. Might the selection bias in each of these instances result from choices made by high-ranking shapers of opinion at universities or publishing houses? No, it applies to crowd-sourced determinations of significance as well. Historian Claire Potter recently showed that women are dramatically underrepresented in Wikipedia contributors and articles. (Her blog is entitled 'Prikipedia.')

So, the downplaying and omission of women as significant thinkers is not exceptional to works on the Muslim tradition, but it is pervasive there. The recent list of the Institute of Ismaili Studies' Mohammed Keshavjee is typical, putting Fazlur Rahman alongside 'activist thinkers like Tariq Ramadan, Mohamed Talbi, Abdolkarim Souroush, Mohamed Shahrour, Ebrahim Moosa and Abdullahi An-Na'im'. Smaller groupings are even less likely to include women, even where they are attentive to geographic diversity. Carol Keersten's *Cosmopolitans and Heretics: New Muslim Intellectuals and the Study of Islam*, focuses on Arkoun, Indonesian Nurcholish Madjid, and Egyptian Hasan Hanafi. David L. Johnston's pamphlet essay 'Evolving Muslim Theologies of Justice' selects again 'three contemporary Muslim thinkers': Egyptian Jamal Al-Banna; Malaysia-based, Afghan-born Mohammad Hashim Kamali; and US-based Egyptian Khaled Abou El Fadl as its subjects.

Not every work excludes women completely. An edited volume on *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an* contains chapters on Madjid, Arkoun, Rahman, Abu Zayd, and five other men, including a Syrian, a Tunisian, a Libyan, an Iranian, and a Turk. Wadud rounds out the ten figures. In her chapter, Barlas observes that 'Wadud is the only woman in this group' which attests to both 'her own achievements in a male-dominated field and her charge that, historically, women have been excluded from Muslim interpretive communities.'. Indeed, Wadud is one of the few figures semi-regularly mentioned when Muslim thinkers are brought up (though Jackson, despite his focus on African-American Islam, does not discuss her). She is the only woman among the eleven Muslim and non-Muslim respondents to Abou El Fadl's *The Place of Tolerance in Islam*, a *Boston Review* volume from a series which packages an essay with responses by noted figures. The cover proclaims 'Khaled Abou El Fadl with Tariq Ali, Milton Viorst, John Esposito, and Others.' Wadud, appropriately enough, is an Other.

Georgetown professor Esposito's own list of Muslim reformers in his book *The Future of Islam* (2009) has a far better ratio of females to males than any of these works: three women, including Wadud, out of eleven figures. He aimed for 'a representative sample.' He explains that his 'primary criteria for selection were that each enjoys a significant following or audience and that together they provide a spectrum of religious and lay as well as traditionalist, or perhaps more accurately neo-traditionalist, and modernist voices for change in the twenty-first century.' He lists Pakistani preacher and educator Farhat Hashmi and Egyptian political scientist and internet entrepreneur (she co-founded Islam Online) Heba Raouf alongside Wadud.

Perhaps it is because his category is 'reformers' rather than intellectuals or thinkers that women comprise slightly over a quarter of his main examples, though quite a number of other male figures are mentioned in passing. Even so, the women do not get the same depth of attention as the male reformers. After noting that the three are 'are Islamically and Western-educated scholars from very diverse cultural contexts' he highlights their femaleness and their concern with gender: 'Hashmi, Wadud, and Raouf are female reformers who often have diametrically opposed positions on women in Islam.' Raouf is mentioned on only one other page; Hashmi and Wadud appear twice more. Televangelists Amr Khaled (Egypt) and Indonesian scholar Abdullah Gymnastiar merit three index citations apiece, Madjid has four and Ramadan five, as does Ali Gomaa. Mustafa Ceric, Boznia-Herzegovina's Grand Mufti, has six. The other two figures mentioned, England's Timothy Winter (aka Abdul Hakim Murad) and, again, Qaradawi, merit, respectively, eight and nine index citations, including some under the subheading 'gender issues.'

Not only do people writing about Muslim reformers generally fail to take women seriously, so do reformers themselves. Ramadan is the most egregious offender here. His *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (Oxford, 2008) makes a broad argument that one must approach current problems in new ways. Like Zaman, Jackson, and Esposito, he signals the interdependence of 'Western' and religious educational

systems and quotes people – men – from various backgrounds. He argues that 'text scholars', the *ulama*, must collaborate with 'context scholars', by which he means specialists outside of the religious sciences. Instead of formalist fatwas that seek to accommodate Muslims to the modern world, there must be a broader project of transformation.

Ramadan's book, like Zaman's, contains copious references to women's issues (Marnia Lazreg, author of *Questioning the Veil*, refers to his 'tantalising yet limited ideas about women'). Unlike Zaman, Ramadan rhetorically welcomes women into the fold of scholarship, religious and especially worldly, stating over and over that 'men and women' or, twice as often, 'women and men' must contribute to the reconsideration, reformulation, and reconstruction he describes. Yet despite Ramadan's insistently inclusive language, the main text is entirely devoid of female scholars, thinkers, or reformers, present or past. It is practically void of women at all. Ramadan names only four Muslim women, all from the Prophet's time. Of these four, two are Muhammad's wives and one is his daughter. One long endnote – twice as long as any other – lists numerous works by Muslim women, including a book of mine, but marginalises female thinkers and female scholarship from the body of the work. Ramadan exhorts women to leap into the fray but pointedly ignores those who do. Relegating women's books to a note, he segregates women and fails to engage our 'interesting contributions' on their merits, postponing such critical reflections to some possible future in which 'women and men' will radically reform the world.

The late Abu Zayd does a little better: he criticises women's scholarship. In *Reformation of Islamic Thought* (2006), he offers a stark, though not entirely unfair, assessment of the accomplishments of Muslim feminist Qur'anic interpretation, claiming that it is 'unable to go beyond existing male hermeneutics,' that the approach to certain verses positing differences between men and women 'is neither new nor original,' and will flounder 'as long as the Qur'an is dealt with only as a text – implying a concept of author.' Abu Zayd, who was also deeply critical of the approaches to the Qur'an taken by male reformists, saw a major shift in the understanding of scripture and its relationship to community practice (and law) as necessary for social transformation. Female exegetes' accomplishments in shifting the debate so that even conservatives must offer at least lip service to principles of justice and perhaps equality meant nothing in the face of their failure to offer something substantively new and theoretically cogent. The broader victory Wadud and others have won, changing what is taken for granted about women in the Qur'an and Islam, is insufficient. Abu Zayd takes women as intellectuals seriously enough to condemn their scholarship on the same grounds that he condemns most men's, but his failure to recognise the real-world objectives female scholars have attempted to meet means that he has failed to appreciate significant elements of women's interpretations. American scholar Aysha Hidayatullah's forthcoming *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an* provides an equally critical but also sympathetic, contextualised, and ultimately constructive account of women's encounters with scripture.

If Wadud's writing gets perhaps less attention than it should, the same cannot be said of her occasional public acts. Magid's predecessor Ingrid Mattson, the first female, first convert, and first North-American born president of ISNA, headed that organisation during the controversy that followed Wadud's leading of a public mixed-gender Friday prayer in New York in 2005. Mattson struck a presumably sincere and also carefully calibrated balance, weighing in against women's imamate for male worshippers, but in favour of significantly greater attention to women's perspectives in all matters of leadership and authority. As she has since pointed out, 'It is my observation that when this religious leadership does not include women, their experiences, concerns and priorities will not be well represented. I am aware that there are those who would argue that this is not inevitable. There are those who are convinced that men are capable of guiding and leading the Muslim community in a just manner without female peers. I would argue that common sense tells us that even the most compassionate and insightful group of men will overlook some of the needs and concerns of the women of their community. More compellingly, experience teaches us that when women are not in leadership positions in their communities … they have few means to access the rights they possess in theory.'

One need not impute dastardly motives to male authorities to observe that they often fail to observe things women notice (like my department chair), and that their perspectives are not somehow universal and impartial while women's are limited and particular. Women's exclusion from the ranks of the religiously authoritative has profound consequences, including, the reinforcement of the notion, as Wadud puts it, that 'the normative Muslim is male.'

Interlude 3

I was in a meeting where the antics of a few senior male faculty members at another university were being discussed. One person used the term diva. Another said prima donna. I pointed out the irony in using feminine terms to discuss oversized male egos. All the women and most of the men around the table laughed. The ranking male at our host institution chided me, though, for analysing things 'too deeply.'

The Right Question

Some years ago, in a characteristically brief and incisive essay, Jewish feminist scholar Judith Plaskow argued that in addressing her tradition's marginalisation of women, 'the right question is theological.' It is not merely a matter, she stated, of patriarchal or misogynist men's textual interventions or social restrictions. Rather, it is a fundamental question about the nature of God, and God's relationship to humanity. Legal and liturgical tweaking can go only so far. As the problem is deeply rooted so must be the solutions.

In the case of Islam, I think the right question is epistemological. Yes, theological questions have got short shift in Muslim feminist thinking, which has mostly been concerned with scriptural interpretation and, to a lesser extent, law. Recent provocative and rich meditations on the nature of revelation, justice, and human personhood by Laury Silvers, Islamic studies scholar at University of Toronto, and Sa'diyya Shaikh, the feminist thinker at University of Cape Town, among others, promise interesting conversations to come. I would contend, though, that underpinning these theological issues and the more mundane ones about legal and practical aspects of Muslim life, there are questions of epistemology. How do we determine what constitutes valid knowledge? As Wadud asks in *Inside the Gender Jihad*: what ways of knowing are possible? Are there gendered dimensions to epistemology? Does women's personal experience play a role, and if so, what sort of role? How can experience be communicated and verified? How and when can one generalise from one's own experience to say something broader about Islam, about humanity, about the world we inhabit?

Of course, diverse experiences of the world do not arise only through gender difference. Geographic diversity, race, and economic conditions can also lead to divergent perspectives. As Barlas notes in her essay on Wadud, she was also the only convert among the ten 'modern Muslim intellectuals' profiled in the book, which 'leads her to raise questions about Islam that people who are born Muslim often do not consider asking.' The same is obviously true for African Americans, as Jackson argues, and women. Therefore, excluding women from positions of religious leadership, Mattson notes, will curtail ordinary female community members' access to religious education, prayer spaces, and support of various kinds.

I have moved from women's absence from scholarly books to women's absence from mosques. There is not a unilinear, causal relationship in either direction. But the two absences reverberate. When women, women's ideas, and Muslim women's ideas in particular, are dismissed by 'religious scholars,' by academics, and by ordinary Muslims, not only are Muslim communities negatively affected but scholarship about Muslims is impoverished. I have lumped together Zaman's analytical study of the Muslim tradition with works of committed, confessional scholarship by Jackson and Ramadan. Zaman aims to elucidate an aspect of the tradition; Jackson and Ramadan aim to shape it. Zaman focuses on the Arab Middle East and the Indian subcontinent, Jackson on Black America, Ramadan on Europe. And yet they are united by their pervasive, consistent, insistent failure to take women's ideas seriously. In Ramadan's case, his rhetorical gestures towards the inclusion of women only highlight his failure to practise what he preaches.

Excluding women from studies of the Muslim 'tradition' isn't just about the fact that women are not present, though. With no women around, and their absence unremarked, men are taken to represent 'human beings.' With no women's books discussed, men's books are assumed to tell the whole story. Even without putting women in the narrative, simply registering women's absence as noteworthy would mean that maleness would cease to be an unmarked category.

In *Radical Reform*, Ramadan argues that Muslims must respond to the challenges of today's world not merely by adapting to it but by transforming it. Feminist historians have long made a similar argument for history. Instead of attempting to repair the deficiencies of the dominant male-centered narrative by adding women and stirring, they have argued that taking women's experiences as foundational both requires and makes possible historical scholarship that better reflects many facets of human experience.

If feminism, as the saying goes, is the radical notion that women are people, then perhaps Muslim feminism is the radical notion that Muslims are, at least sometimes, women. If so, then it makes sense for scholars of Islam to pay attention.

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